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## SHELLEY'S ODE TO THE WEST WIND

Why did Shelley choose the West Wind, and set it apart from and above all the rest in his great ode?

It is easy to understand why wind in the abstract,—any strong, swift, masterful wind,—must have had an especial attraction for a poet of Shelley's temperament. He recognized that there was something in his own uncontrolled nature originally akin to a creature so "tameless and swift and proud." Shelley, moreover, was peculiarly alive to the tireless energy, the incessant and intricate activity of force in creation, and for him the different forms in which this protean activity manifested itself had a positive personality. The dull, dense mass of matter is constantly represented by him as "plastic,"—as being outwardly changed, or shaped, or driven by force, or spirit. The cloud, in the poem which we naturally associate with the *Ode to the West Wind*, is brought before us living and acting, and our thoughts are directed to it as a force in the moving scheme of things. As a poet of Nature, Shelley is thus often dynamic when even Wordsworth is comparatively static. Shelley is absorbed in the thought of Nature at work and he views the world not merely as a visionary appearance mysteriously illuminated with the indwelling Divine life, but as the shifting expression of underlying and interacting forces, which he individualizes as personal powers.

But while this may explain Shelley's sense of kinship to the wind, his preference for the West Wind remains to be accounted for.

We know that the *Ode* was not a purely imaginative production; it was not suggested by the thought of the West Wind in general. It was the outcome of a definite personal experience, which Shelley describes with some minuteness in his note to the poem. The *Ode* "was conceived and chiefly written," Shelley tells us "in a wood that skirts the Arno near Florence." A "tempestous" West Wind had been blowing throughout the day, and "at sunset" there was "a violent tempest of hail and rain, attended by that magnificent thunder and lightning peculiar to the Cisalpine regions." Shelley seems to have spent the greater part of the day out-of-doors, absorbed by the power and magnificence of the spectacle, and the im-

mediate source of his inspiration is not the storm, impressive as it was, but the work of the West Wind at a certain time and place. But while it is true that the immediate inspiration is thus concrete and local, the poem gains breadth from the fact that Shelley rises from his thought of one particular manifestation of the power of the West Wind, to the conception of the power of the West Wind in general, to an appreciation of its personality and its peculiar office and place in the wider life of the natural world. It is only when we study the poem from what we may call the meteorological aspect, that we arrive at a full sympathy with the poet's idea.

We must remember that the *Ode* was composed in a region ruled throughout the greater part of the year by the westerly winds. During the Summer, the wind often sweeps into Italy hot and dry from the South, but with the Autumnal equinox comes the West wind from the Atlantic, heavy with moisture and putting Summer to rout with storms and Autumnal rains. It is this "wild, west wind" whose coming means the end of Summer, that is first invoked. Shelley's whole nature is roused and exalted not only by the power of the wind, or the violence of the storm; he is fascinated by the realization that he is present at a turning point in the life of the year. From his post in a wood near the Arno, he watches the West Wind gather his forces for the final victory. Through the day this "tempestuous wind whose temperature is at once mild and animating, was collecting the vapors which pour down the Autumnal rains." By sunset, as the poet anticipated, all things were ready for the final contest and then followed that "violent tempest" which marked the end of Summer, the beginning of the rainy season, and the assumption of his kingdom by the West Wind, that is literally the very "breath of Autumn's being."

But the West Wind has a double significance for the poet. On the western coast of Italy it performs two strikingly contrasted missions; it ends the Summer, but it also brings in the Spring. During the early part of February, the conqueror of Summer returns to conquer Winter; it comes to bring life as, a few months earlier, it has brought death. Few passages in Latin poetry are more familiar, or more charming, than those which celebrate the return of *Favonius*, or *Zephyrus*, this favorable (*faveo*), or life-bringing wind of the Spring. Lucretius pays his tribute to "winged Zephyrus," "*veris praenuntius*" (*De Rerum Nat.* 5. 737); and Vergil (*Georg.* 1. 44.), Catullus (46. 2.), and Horace (*Car.* 1. 4. and 4. 7.)

are among those who join in the chorus of praise. The moderns follow the lead of the ancients, and Chaucer pictures Zephyrus reviving the "tender croppes" with his "sweete Breethe," or Milton looks forward to the time when Favonius will reinspire the frozen earth.

Now Shelley invokes the West Wind of Autumn, but while the dead leaves are driven before it and the storm is approaching, there rises before him a vision of the West Wind of the Spring. Shelley's tribute to this Spring West Wind is not only charming, perhaps above all the others, in its delicate grace, and wealth of poetic suggestion, but so far as I can recall, it differs in one respect from all the rest. To him, this wind of the blue vernal heaven, is the "azure sister" of the rough wind of Autumn. She is the feminine complement of the same power, working with her "impetuous" brother by bringing to life the "winged seeds" which he has "charioted" to their wintry beds, and so preserved. The West Wind is thus glorified above other winds, because of its office as "destroyer and preserver"; because this wind which drives the dead leaves to corruption, is akin to that other West Wind which quickens the dreaming earth to life.

Up to this point, or throughout the first division of the poem, Shelley has been chiefly occupied with the West Wind's task on the earth, as he watched it visibly at work around him, or as he went beyond the present and imagined it coming in the Spring. The second division treats of the Wind in the heaven, and here he is still thinking of its local and apparent activity as it is present before his eyes. But in the third part, he leaves his particular point of observation, his thought passes beyond the wood with its trees stripped of leaves, its heaven of flying cloud, its signs of the coming storm, and his imagination takes a wider flight. He sees the West Wind at work on the water, as he has seen its impress on earth and sky. He sees it as in a vision troubling the water off the coast many miles to the Southward, rousing the tranquil Mediterranean from his summer dreams, and then, detaching himself more completely from its local and special manifestations, he follows it in its course across the expanse of ocean. He invokes the wind—

For whose path the Atlantic's level powers  
Cleave themselves into chasms.

Is this solemn invocation addressed to a wind that merely hap-

pened to come from the West, and which therefore must have passed over the Atlantic? Does not Shelley rather recognize here, as throughout the *Ode*, the personality and the especial office of the wind he is addressing? The passage just quoted seems hardly applicable to a wind whose activities are merely local, temporal, and incidental. Winds shift and veer, but over a certain region of the North Atlantic the West Wind is King. A "turbulent ruler," as Joseph Conrad calls him in his sailor-like study of the East and West winds in his *Mirror of the Sea*, but nevertheless a beneficent one. It is this masterful wind, the rain-bringing wind, that has made the British Isles and Northwestern Europe what they are; it is this wind that is the home-coming wind of Conrad's sketch and of Tennyson's lullaby—the "wind of the Western sea." "The narrow seas around these isles," Conrad writes, "where British admirals keep watch and ward upon the marches of the Atlantic ocean, are subject to the turbulent sway of the west wind. Clothed in a mantle of dazzling gold and draped in rags of black clouds like a beggar, the might of the Westerly Wind sits enthroned upon the Western horizon with the whole North Atlantic as a footstool for his feet, and the first twinkling stars making a diadem for his brow." Shelley's invocation to the West Wind as one whose path is across the level Atlantic, gains in meaning when we remember that the West Wind does not traverse it as an alien adventurer, as a maurader from without, he moves over it as a king in his royal progress. Circling the globe in this northern belt as he does in the southern, this region of the "roaring forties" is a king's highway ordained and set apart for him.

To Shelley, then, the western wind had a definite character and office. Tameless, swift, proud, uncontrollable, even fierce—it was yet above all the spirit of power; the spirit that in sweeping away the old brought in the new, the wind that was both radical and conservative, both destroyer and preserver; that showed us death as but a transitional phase of life. May we not say that if Shelley had written an ode to any other wind, while it might have been equally good, it would, of necessity, have been utterly different. His words apply to this particular wind and to no other, for in this matter also—

The east is east and the west is west,  
And never the twain shall meet.